

Wine tasting groups enjoy good company and new discoveries for the wine cellar

By Peter Blattmann

A wine tasting get-together is easier to put together than you might have imagined — and can result in some new ideas for stocking your wine cellar while enjoying the company of friends.

The kind of wine tasting you will host and many of the details will depend on how serious and knowledgeable your guests are about wine.

Some people see wine as basically just an excuse to gather with friends, while others, the hard-core tasters, prefer to keep their focus on what's in the glass.

For the experienced tasters, you can organize what is known as a "vertical" tasting, where several consecutive years of wine are sampled. This can be a complicated and costly affair as the older vintages will usually be both expensive and difficult to locate.

Horizontal tastings, where wines of a single category and single vintage (e.g. 2000 Bordeaux from several different appellations) are tasted, are a little easier to put together.

Varietal tastings are easy enough to organize and can be educational as well. These involve tasting different bottles from the same grape and same vintage but from different areas (e.g. 2004 Chardonnay from Burgundy, California, Australia and Chile). Here tasters can learn what the different areas contribute to the same varietal.

One good way to keep the cost down for the host is for each guest to bring along their favourite wine; this often makes for lively discussions and amusing anecdotes. Generally suggest wines that can be found in many wine stores.

The best way by far, to taste more expensive wines, is to start a tasting group. The basic idea is that by pooling resources, a group can taste more wines of higher quality than an individual could taste alone.

Let's say you want to sample eight of the top rated California Cabernets to decide what to buy for your own cellar. At an average of \$90 a bottle, that would cost \$720. But, because each bottle can easily provide 12 good tasting pours, you can invite 11 other people to share the expense and the cost goes down to a manageable \$60 a person. A well-conceived tasting group will deepen anyone's understanding on wine.

Some groups prefer to know what they're drinking, while others use a "blind" theme. A blind format builds confidence and a healthy skepticism — the most expensive bottle is frequently inferior to its more humble peers. Wine prices, like those of any commodities, often say less about quality than about current market conditions.

The surest way to get the most out of wines is to learn "one's own taste" and then buy accordingly. If in a blind tasting you prefer a \$12 Cabernet to a \$50 rival, then you can save a lot of money.

Finally, the success of any group depends on its members. The world's greatest wine will give little pleasure in unpleasant company.

Important Tasting Tips

- Use glasses with class.
- Pour two ounces in a 12-ounce bulb-shaped glass that tapers slightly toward the top. This enables swirling to maximize aromatics and appreciation of the "legs" or "tears".
- Cleanse the palate
 - Food acts as a palate cleanser-refresher. Provide unsalted, unflavoured crackers or plain French baguette. Keep other food until after the tasting.
 - Serve plenty of water to rinse those taste buds and rehydrate.
- Create Tasting Notes sheets for tasting participants
 - Print up basic sheets with the major components: Colour, Aromatics, Body and Flavour profile.
- Always take notes — otherwise many of the lessons will be lost. If nothing else, indicate your preference.

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Peter Blattmann created Canada's premier wine and food event, the Fairmont Banff Springs International Wine & Food Festival, now in its 14th year. More recently Peter joined George of the Post Hotel Lake Louise to introduce their "Lake Louise Wine Summit" which has already been rated as one of the world's most prestigious wine & food events. A leading wine and food expert, Blattmann enjoys conducting gastronomic tours of renowned culinary centres and famous wine regions. More information on these pursuits can be found at www.gourmet-experience.com or call Peter at 1-888-682-9297.